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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 HANOI 000011

SENSITIVE
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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM ECON SENV MARR CH VM

SUBJECT: How much influence does China have over Vietnam's internal politics?

REF: A) 09 HANOI 413, 417, 537; B) 09 HANOI 809, 823, 881
C) 09 HANOI 672; D) 09 HANOI 897
E) 08 HCMC 815, 596, 09 HANOI 805, 807, 926; F) 09 HANOI 1094
G) HANOI 7; H) 09 HANOI 330, 899; I) 09 HANOI 927; J) 09 HANOI 909

CLASSIFIED BY: Michael Michalak, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: Animosity toward China, heartfelt and pervasive in the most routine of times, appears to have taken on an added urgency in the wake of sensitive border negotiations, protracted controversy over Chinese investment in bauxite mining projects in the Central Highlands, and China's imposition this summer of a unilateral "fishing ban" in the South China Sea. A wide range of contacts, particularly in the Western-oriented intellectual and dissident community, insist that China wields an inordinate and growing sway over Vietnamese decision-making, with influence felt on issues such as the control of information on territorial disputes; resource, environmental, and energy strategy; and personnel decisions in advance of Vietnam's 2011 Party Congress. Some insist that "pro-China" forces in the Vietnamese security services are behind the recent crackdown on political dissent, acting at the behest of Beijing. The reality is much more prosaic. Given its proximity, size, and economic might, China remains a predominant consideration for Vietnam's leadership and necessarily constrains options. Beijing does not, however, dictate Vietnam's internal policies. END SUMMARY.

The Panda's Long Paw

¶12. (C) Over the past several months, Vietnam's Western-oriented intellectual, journalistic, and dissident communities have ratcheted up their criticism of China, taking particular aim at what they describe as Beijing's inordinate influence over Vietnam's internal decision-making. Spurred initially by an unprecedented barrage of public/online opposition to Chinese involvement in bauxite development in the Central Highlands (ref A), critics were further incensed by the PRC's enforcement this summer of its unilateral "fishing ban" in the South China Sea. Concerns about China's influence have been amplified in advance of the Eleventh Party Congress in January 2011, with different members of Vietnam's Politburo whispered to be under Beijing's sway. This past year, General Secretary Nong Duc Manh, PM Nguyen Tan Dung, Standing Secretary Truong Tan Sang, National Assembly Chair Nguyen Phu Trong, Hanoi Party Chief Pham Quang Nghi, and propaganda czar To Huy Rua have all been characterized -- variously and inconsistently

-- as Beijing's man in Hanoi. These are not innocent, disinterested statements. Given the depth of anti-China sentiment in Vietnam, a pro-China label is hardly an advantage; rather, it can be used as a political cudgel, as we saw at the height of the bauxite controversy.

¶3. (C) Among many of our contacts it is taken as an article of faith that China will try to dictate the leadership succession in 2011 (ref B). Vu Thu Thanh, a former MFA official who represents the U.S.-ASEAN Business Council in Hanoi, contends that China would use this year's ASEAN meetings in Hanoi to shape the Party Congress, particularly on personnel matters. Thanh's former colleagues in the MFA and counterparts in other ministries assume that China keeps files on rising cadre, encouraging the careers of those who appear to be in sync ideologically and subverting those it disapproves, he insisted. Nguyen Tran Bat, the well-connected chairman of the InvestConsult Group, similarly asserted that "everyone" in government is suspicious of China's intelligence services, which Bat claimed are pervasive in Vietnam and weigh in on promotion decisions. Thanh's brother Nguyen Tran Khanh, who handles the company's business in HCMC, was even more direct,

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asserting that China exploits the greed of individual CPV members by providing opportunities for personal gain. Neither Thanh nor Bat could provide specific examples -- nor could anyone else -- but the belief is widespread that China exercises influence. National Assembly Representative Nguyen Lan Dung, who serves on the Vietnam-China Parliamentary Caucus, was skeptical of any direct Chinese role in personnel matters, though he noted that the fact that the notion is out there likely has a "self-censoring" effect on decisions.

And Sharp, Pointy Teeth

¶4. (C) More ominously, several of our contacts assert that China is behind Vietnam's recent crackdown on human rights (ref C), just as they have long blamed China for "exporting" environmental pollution to Vietnam. At a lunch hosted by the Ambassador for Deputy Secretary Steinberg (ref D), the editor of Vietnam's leading online news service, VietnamNet, Nguyen Anh Toan, and Hanoi University Law Professor Hoang Ngoc Giao complained that Vietnam had acquiesced to demands from Chinese diplomats in Hanoi that journalists responsible for articles critical of China be fired. Senior economist Le Dang Doanh pointed to swift action by the MPS to clamp down on a group of youths who unveiled T-shirts saying "The Spratleys Belong to Vietnam" at the 2009 National Day celebrations as an act of Chinese perfidy. Similarly, several of Vietnam's political blogs blamed China for the conviction last year of blogger Dieu Cay on politically motivated tax evasion charges, as well as the detention in August of bloggers known for anti-China views who had "plotted" to distribute T-shirts proclaiming Vietnam's ownership of the Paracels/Spratleys (ref E).

¶5. (C) Conspiracy theories abound. The most fully articulated point to the Ministry of Defense's General Department II ("GDII"), a shadowy intelligence service headed by the influential and (critics say) pro-China Vice Defense Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh. Several of these theories are conjoined in an omnibus treatment compiled by the former Bangkok Bureau Chief for the Far Eastern Economic Review in an article published online for the Asia Times (<http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/KI12Ad04.html>). In it, the author quotes a senior member of the exiled dissident political party Viet Tan who asserts that GDII is "one of the primary means for China to assert influence in Vietnam." GDII is certainly suspect, having been involved in a Watergate-style wiretapping

scandal of former General Secretary Le Kha Phieu's Politburo rivals in the 1990s; and General Vinh's father in law, General Dung Vu Ching (who in his day also headed Vietnam's military intelligence), is infamous for his efforts to slander Vietnam War hero General Vo Nguyen Giap and the reformist former Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet as CIA spies. What is much less apparent -- asserted but not substantiated -- is the link to China. The article cites Australian Defense University scholar Carlyle Thayer in describing the wiretapping scandal; however, in a separate online commentary, Thayer himself discounts speculation that CDII is China's stooge. (See <http://www.scribd.com/doc/19695242/Thayer-Vietnam-Military-Intelligence-in-Domestic-Affairs.>)

¶16. (C) General Vinh is no soft touch. At a press conference unveiling Vietnam's 2009 Defense White Paper, Vinh identified "pernicious efforts to use the mantle of human rights and democracy to encourage anti-Party and anti-State forces" as a security challenge second only to the effects of the global economic downturn. At the same time, however, Vinh also mentioned candidly the possibility of military conflict with China over the South China Sea -- a topic usually avoided in public comments -- though he was at pains to sound diplomatic. In a meeting the following week with the Ambassador and a visiting delegation from the U.S.-China Congressional Commission, General Vinh presented a

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mostly benign picture of China's influence, emphasizing that China's economic success provided substantial opportunities for Vietnam and could be a force for regional stability. Again, however, he did not shy away from the more threatening aspects of China's diplomatic, economic, and military rise. Vinh expressly rejected China's expansive claims in the South China Sea and, when pressed, insisted that Vietnam "knows how to fight and to win" and would "do what is necessary" to safeguard its territory. These are views firmly in line with Vietnam's pragmatic approach to China (ref F) and echo the tone taken by Vietnam's Minister of Defense, Phung Quang Thanh, in his December 2009 visit to the United States: if Vinh is China's shill, he hides it well.

Similarities in Political Structure, Culture, and Perspective

¶17. (C) There are, to be sure, clear similarities in how Vietnam and China's Party/state structures approach dissent (there are also differences too: on religion, for example, Vietnam has generally taken a more relaxed stance and is not listed as a Country of Particular Concern. Ref G). These similarities, however, largely reflect cognate political systems, shared ideological perspectives, and, with these, a common obsession with internal stability and regime security. "Peaceful evolution" may be a term borrowed from Chinese political campaigns of the early 1990s, but Vietnam's hardliners do not need China to tell them to be paranoid, as even a cursory glance at the CPV's most recent internal screed, Decree 34, makes plain (ref H). As the former chair of China Studies at the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Nguyen Huy Quy, put it, Vietnam and China are members of a very small number of capitalist-oriented Communist countries, and this gives their leaders ample common ground.

¶18. (C) To put things differently: It is true that many of those caught up in Vietnam's current crackdown expressed anti-China views; it is also true that Vietnam's relationship with China is a fraught subject. It does not, though, follow that Vietnam is necessarily acting on China's instruction in suppressing dissent or that there is a secretive pro-China cabal. There is reason enough domestically for Vietnam's leaders to want to keep the lid on --

popular ill will, though initially directed at Beijing, could easily turn in a less welcome direction. The issue is control. Vietnam's state-controlled media itself frequently publishes language sharply critical of China, and a prominent editor of the Party's official website, Dao Duy Quat, was publicly reprimanded in September for not inserting the appropriate "tough" language in an article about Chinese naval exercises (an oversight he chivalrously blamed on his secretary). The slogans on blogger "mama mushroom's" dissident T-shirts simply (and smartly) repeated official pronouncements. China does not dictate Vietnam's line, but neither does Vietnam's public.

¶9. (C) And then there is corruption. Allegations on the blogs that PM's Dung's support on bauxite were bought with Chinese money are fanciful; however, Khanh of InvestConsult is probably not far off the mark when he complains of shady dealings. There is a larger nexus between ideological hardliners such as Rua (ref I) and "non-partisan," but corrupt political magnates such as HCMC Party Boss Le Thanh Hai, which reinforces China's interests, even if China does not dictate terms. Rua and his ilk aim to preserve the vanguard position of the Communist Party, a perspective they share with China's leaders. Others, a majority perhaps, oppose political reform because it threatens access to patronage -- another structural feature shared with China. Again, though, the participant's are acting according to their (narrow) self-interest, not on China's orders.

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The Nature of China's influence

¶10. (C) None of this is to imply that Vietnam's leaders can (or do) ignore Beijing. To the contrary: Basic structural asymmetries in the relationship continually constrain Hanoi's options. There is pressure from China, continually applied, and on the Vietnamese side, lessons learned. (China's ambassador to Vietnam, Sun Guoxiang, told the Ambassador that the pace of visits is so intense that officials below the rank of vice minister do not even merit a control officer, and there are important visits conducted at the provincial level that do not even involve the PRC Embassy.) Asked directly, Vietnamese officials flatly deny that they are influenced by China -- but one can imagine, for example, that the same Vietnamese officials that shut down access to FaceBook (ref J) are eagerly observing China's reaction to Google, just as an earlier generation of economic policymakers drew from China's experience with agricultural reform and export-processing zones. Officials here readily admit to an "em-anh" (younger brother - elder brother) relationship with China. The point is, rather, that Beijing's influence is much less direct than critics assert, and it is constantly refracted through the lens of domestic interests, intrigue, and pride. How Vietnam should deal most effectively with China is a subject of considerable internal division, but this is a debate that goes well beyond a putative battle between pro- and anti-China factions. It is all too easy -- for us as well as for critical voices within Vietnam -- to point the finger at China. In the end, Vietnam remains resolutely independent, and with this comes ownership of its own successes and failings.

¶11. (U) This cable was coordinated with ConGen HCMC.
Michalak